

ANTRIEP Seminar on Better School Management: The Role of the Head Teacher

From (September 19-21, 2000)
Shanghai, China

The Fourth Meeting of the Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning was probably the most ambitious and at the same time, the most successful organized so far. The number of participants exceeded those at the previous meetings, a fact which can be explained both by the popularity and aptness of the seminar theme “Better School Management: the Role of the Head Teacher” and by the attraction of the venue, the surprising city of Shanghai. The local organization was in the hands of the Shanghai Institute for Human Resources Development (SIHRD).

The seminar’s overall objective was to identify policies and strategies that will improve the quality of schools by strengthening the leadership and management capacities of head teachers. The specific objectives were to:

- Give an overview of the situation of head teachers in different Asian countries including current government policies concerning the management of the profession of head teacher;
- Explore potential strategies to improve the role of head teachers in leading and managing schools;
- Examine existing capacity-building activities for head teachers in the region and discuss strategies to reinforce them.

There were 71 participants, 26 of whom were Chinese (including some 15 head teachers). The international participants consisted of four groups: members of staff of ANTRIEP institutions, senior deci-

sion-makers within ministries of education, representatives of international agencies, and individual experts.

The working documents consisted of a limited number of thematic papers, prepared and presented by well-known experts. These thematic papers were: Back to the Basics: School Leadership in a Knowledge Society, by Prof. Cheng Kai-Ming, Dean, Faculty of Education of the University of Hong Kong; The Profile of a Successful Head Teacher, by Mr. Nick Thornton, CEO, Australian Principals’ Centre; Community Participation and School Governance - Diverse Perspectives and Emerging Issues, by Prof. R. Govinda, Senior Fellow, NIEPA; and Using Research Projects to Improve School Management, by Mr. Tang Xiaojie, Deputy Director, Shanghai Institute for Human Resources Development. In addition, a set of nine national or state-level diagnoses on head teachers were prepared by the ANTRIEP member institutions. These provided a rich source of information. The thematic papers were presented and briefly discussed in plenary sessions. They were afterwards debated upon in more detail in groupwork, as were the national diagnoses. The discussions were lively and thought-provoking.

Some of the conclusions drawn from the presentations and discussions were:

- The situation of head teachers is very context-specific and depends on: the size and level of the school, the educational policy-environment, the level of social and economic development

and the effectiveness of the public service, of which the education system is a part.

- In a number of countries or areas, the state is very weak, the public service ineffective and the available resources extremely scarce. In such an environment, it will be difficult to change the head teachers without first improving that environment. Notwithstanding these differences, many countries experience similar challenges.
- Everywhere, a policy trend towards more school autonomy, and towards emphasizing the role of the head teachers can be noted. There might be a need to re-consider this policy, for at least three reasons: (a) it has not been everywhere the statement of internal pressure or debate, but rather the result of copying seemingly successful external models; (b) the policy has been, from time to time, part of an attempt by national authorities to evade their own

responsibilities; (c) the policy needs to be adapted in function of the different contexts described above. This does not imply that it is a mistake to put a greater stress on the role of the head teacher, but that, before such a policy is implemented, most countries need to make serious efforts at awareness-raising, within the society and within school communities in particular, and to take the necessary measures to improve the schools' environment. What is also preoccupying is that this policy has been accompanied by insufficient policy measures at central level, to strengthen the position of the head teacher.

A number of innovations have been implemented in several countries to improve recruitment, strengthen professional development, offer a more attractive career path and clarify lines and areas of authority. The most comprehensive effort has probably been made in Korea, apart from Hong Kong and different states in Australia. More piecemeal innovations are being tried out in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and China. The overall result of the weakness of these reforms is that there is a wide discrepancy

between the present profile of the head teacher, which has undergone very little change, and the ideal profile of an innovative pedagogical leader. In many countries, the incentives to become or remain a head teacher have been decreasing rather than increasing.

The challenge for most countries is to turn these piecemeal and un-coordinated reform efforts into a global policy framework. Such an integrated policy, among other things, should:

- Clarify the areas of autonomy and the levels of accountability so that head teachers feel strengthened rather than over-burdened;
- Accompany such autonomy and accountability with a strong and consistent support system, especially for newly appointed and/or isolated head teachers;
- Improve recruitment and selection procedures, for instance by early identification of potential head teachers and a system of mentoring by selected innovative practising head teachers;
- Develop a motivating career path, by offering professional development opportunities and strengthening in-service training; and
- Set up a mutual support system and discussion forum for head teachers.

Setting up and implementing such a policy will encounter different challenges. The numbers of head teachers are daunting: about 10,000 in Sri Lanka, some 200,000 in Pakistan and over a million in China. Training such numbers will require creativity. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the head teachers are only one aspect, and that their interests do not always coincide with those of, for instance, the teachers or the community. Many participants highlighted the particular difficulty of motivating head teachers. The strongest motivation seems to lie not so much in the financial incentives, but in the experience of seeing their own school

improve. Their lack of power and ensuing inability to improve on the situation of their schools is undoubtedly a disincentive. But giving them more autonomy has led in several countries to an unwillingness of staff to take on this position, because of the workload and stress.

While reforming school management offers a complex challenge, there are several reasons for hope. A policy consensus exists that more responsibilities and resources should be given to schools, to guarantee lasting change; several successful innovations have, at little cost, led to more effectiveness in the way central ministries manage schools and head teachers; and, finally, many school leaders have succeeded, against the odds, in transforming their schools into small centres of excellence. In the following months, the member institutions of the ANTRIEP Network will take up an exciting challenge: they would examine what has made such successes possible; how to reproduce them; and what should be the role of capacity-building institutions to turn these into general practice.

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